

# Ag. Planes Past and Present

## Part 2 - Tigers and more

We continue with John Nicolson's series covering a history of aerial topdressing in New Zealand. In our last edition we talked about ag pilot Alan Prichard with his Whitney Straight topdresser and introduced the Auster B.8 Agricola.

TWO OTHER companies to operate Austers were Auster Air Services and Southern Scenic Airways (SSA). Fred 'Popeye' Lucas of Queenstown (SSA) was dropping poison rabbit pellets/carrots from his modified Austers in September 1948. SSA soon after had four Auster Autocrats/Aiglets, carrying around 400 to 600lb per load, spreading 30 to 40 tons of rabbit bait a day.

Auster Air Services was formed at Timaru in 1953 with four Austers, all of which had been withdrawn from service by late 1966, having been replaced by Pawnees, Cessna 180s and a Beaver.

### The Ag. Tigers

In the days of old our aerial topdressing fleet was made up of Tiger Moths, Tiger Moths and Tiger Moths - economical and available. Names deserving of a prominent place in our aerial agriculture history books, following on from the RNZAF trials of 1948, include John Brazier, Airwork Ltd of Christchurch, who was spreading poison pellets in his Tiger Moth (ZK-ASO) in early 1949. The Tiger's normal payload was 500lb, but loads of 550lb were common on a good day. Gisborne Aerial Topdressing were also flying a topdressing Tiger Moth in 1949 (ZK-AQC) which was flown by Ken Young. AQC was withdrawn from service in 1954 and was then de-rigged and stored. Aussie James (James Aviation Ltd) too was into fertilising farm pastures, in late 1949, with his famous Tiger Moth topdresser (ZK-AJO), having logged 6,914 topdressing flying hours before it was deactivated in 1959. Walter Harding's (Wanganui Aero Work) Tiger Moth ZK-ARO (NZ816), starting with WAW in early 1950, is another of the celebrated trailblazing Gipsy-powered bi-planes, which was involved in a fatal crash in February 1952 near Hawera. Some were saying in those days that a loaded Tiger was on the 'ragged edge' - even on a good day. And without wing

flaps or wheel brakes I'm bound to suggest that this is probably why so many ag. Tiger pilots lucked out. The reality is that today's ag pilots with their modern, purpose-built aeroplanes and modern technology couldn't do their job without brakes and wing flaps, given that there's nearly always one hand on the stick and the hand firmly attached to the flap lever.

As at December 1950 there were 62 Tiger Moths (with 11 being prepared across the country), plus six Austers, actively involved in aerial topdressing here. There were 148 ag. Tigers on the job in 1953, growing to 182 by 1956. By 1965, only five remained on the job.

New Zealand's first fatal accident, following 35 non-fatal accidents involving topdressing aircraft (mostly Tiger Moths), was recorded in October 1950. The aircraft was a Rural Aviation (New Plymouth) Tiger Moth and the pilot was William (Jerry) Hooper, a former RNZAF pilot. It was revealed that the pilot, who had logged 4,500 flying hours, was flying a climbing procedural steep turn at the end of a sowing run without maintaining sufficient speed. Rural Aviation named one of their Beavers 'Jerry' in memory of Jerry Hooper.

### Aerial topdressing stats: 1950 onwards

In the first operational year of 1950, March to March, there were 32,055 aerial topdressing flights made during which time there was 5,083 tonne/11,206lb/5,083kg of solids spread and 2,137 flying hours logged (and there was 108 tonne/238,099lb/108,001kg of poison bait dropped). In the boon times of the sixties and seventies the number of flights were pretty much around the million per annum. In 1974 more than 120,000 topdressing flights were logged, dropping to 80,000 in 1981. Between 1982 and 1987,

the median yearly flying hours logged on solids (super/lime etc.) was reported to be 40,000 hours, with cropspraying hours over the same period equalled 13,000 flying hours. Between 2000 and 2006, fixed wing topdressers were still flying between 40 and 50,000 flying hours per annum.

In the next instalment: Beavers



Parked up outside Auster Air Services' base at Timaru (c.1959) is this un-Auster-like J.5G Cirrus Autocar, which is powered by a 155hp Blackburn Cirrus Major engine. BDJ, with a payload of 700lb, arrived in NZ new in 1954 and was soon after with AAS. In mid-1970 it was re-engined with a Lycoming O-320 engine and in June 1982 BDJ was written off in a crash at Wallacetown. (John Nicolson Collection)



The first ever Tiger Moth to fly in New Zealand, January 7 1938. This particular DH82A is indeed a dramatic example of the adapted aircraft that were at the forefront of aerial topdressing in this country - 'A' denotes having been fitted with the 130hp engine, and known as the Tiger Moth II. Early production DH82's (from 1931) were powered by a 120hp engine and were thus known as the Tiger Moth I. ASA was first registered (1938) as ZK-AFO and was taken on by the RNZAF as NZ720 a year later in October 1939 until June 1948. Then re-registered as ZK-ASA, this Tiger went to Air Contracts Ltd (Masterton) in March 1950, later withdrawn from service in 1956. Another of Air Contract's Tigers (ZK-AZQ) is said to have sown 164 tonnes of solids and flew 661 separate topdressing sorties in a single month of 1955. Following numerous private owners, and suffering a total of 11 crashes in its life, ASA was again re-registered as ZK-AFO in 1981 and is today held in storage. (John Nicolson Collection)



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